

The Deathworlders

Books 

Chapter 2: Aftermath EPUB

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“I’ll spare you as much of the jargon as I can, eh?”

Not for the first time, General Martin Tremblay was struck by the youth of the scientists working on this project. If it had been up to him, the whole thing would have been as hush-hush as possible, locked up behind layer after layer of need-to-know statuses and classified stamps. But, his way

had to play second fiddle to the reality of aliens on live sports news, right here in British Columbia. When he'd delegated the task of bringing in biologists, physicists and engineers from across the globe to one of his staff, he hadn't quite anticipated that she would opt for a team that was practically fresh from their doctorates.

Oh, sure, there were plenty of grey hairs around, but Tremblay was feeling decidedly venerable surrounded by all this buzzing enthusiastic youthfulness.

"I'd appreciate that. Let's get to the meat."

He regretted the turn of phrase immediately as the biologist—a rotund and jovial man with a habit of roaring with laughter at the slightest joke, deliberate or not—released his characteristic chuckle and then turned to the report, which was mercifully brief.

“From what we were able to scrape off the ice in Vancouver after the hockey teams were done with them, they’re...kind of unimpressive, actually,” he opined.

“The endoskeleton seems to be based around comparatively large crystals of silica, with not a trace of collagen in sight. Remarkably fragile. Musculature is...we think their muscles can pull, push and twist, where ours can only pull, so they need fewer muscles overall to get the same range of motion, but each muscle’s far weaker than our own—the samples we have, bruised and crushed as they were, had a tensile strength about that of smoked salmon. Even accounting for tissue damage, they’re decidedly weaker than we are, and they couldn’t possibly move as fast as we can. Just not enough force or leverage.”

“That explains why they broke so easily,” Tremblay said.

Dr. Taylor nodded. “It’s weird, it’s like their whole physiology never evolved to deal with even a fraction of the daily challenges ours did. I mean, there’s a lot we can’t test given how badly damaged all the specimens were but what we *do* have says that an average guy could probably rip the arms off these things if he tried.”

“So what the hell did they think they were going to accomplish?” Tremblay said.

“Interesting as this is, my job is to figure out what kind of a threat they pose, and to do that I need more than an analysis about how squishy they are. I could see that just from watching the game.”

Taylor’s colleague, Dr. Betty-Anne Cote, cleared her throat at that one. She tended to let Taylor do the talking—he was the kind of large personality who filled a room, while she

was more the ‘quietly get things done while nobody’s watching’ type. They complemented each other well, not least because when she did venture an opinion, Taylor tended to shut up and let her share it.

“We’re, like, the only people on the planet who could claim to be experts in xenopsychology,” she said. “So we’re starting from scratch. And I guess the first assumption we have to make is that, to them, their physical frailty would be normal and we’d seem freakishly strong and durable.”

“It would explain the weaponry.” Taylor commented.

“You’ve seen the interview tapes?”

Tremblay indicated that he had. All of the athletes had given a roughly similar description of what it felt like to be shot with an alien gun—pathetic. While the shots had knocked them off their feet, to a seasoned hockey player in full gear

the impacts had been little worse than irritating. The goaltenders had felt hardly anything at all.

Careful testing had suggested that the guns delivered, by some as-yet unidentified mechanism, a discharge of kinetic energy that propagated along the direction of fire at the speed of light. The weapons had plenty of advantages—they were portable, agile, had no recoil at all, and seemed to convert their stored energy very efficiently, but they stood no hope at all of seriously threatening a well-conditioned soldier in full battle gear.

“If we assume that the average target for those weapons is about as tough as the idiots who landed in Vancouver, then those weapons start to make sense.” Dr.Cote told him.

“*Merde.*” Tremblay pinched the bridge of his nose. “I really don’t want to go to my colleagues and the Ministry of

Defence with a report to the effect that these things pose about as much threat as an angry twelve-year-old.” he said.

“Well, from what we’ve gathered so far, sir, that would be the truth.” Taylor shrugged, “Don’t tell me you’d prefer to give a report to the effect that we’re hopelessly outmatched and can kiss our collective *derrieres* goodbye?”

“Well, no. It’s just a bit...anticlimactic.” Tremblay said.

As she returned to her work, Betty Cote muttered a heartfelt “Amen to that.”

“Dumbasses.”

That insult woke Terri Boone up, and she sat up straighter and adjusted her seatbelt, embarrassed to find that she had fallen asleep. It took her a few seconds to get up to speed,

but the target of the insult turned out to be obvious—a mass of people filling the road, waving signs and chanting.

Most of the signs showed variants on the theme of alien faces, most the classic large-eyed Roswell green or grey cueball, some actual cartoon versions of the things—
Hunters—that had attacked Vancouver, one or two of the sleek black aliens fought by Sigourney Weaver and, in one case, an ET puppet impaled atop a steel pole in a way that implied he'd never be phoning anybody at all.

Between the car's air conditioning, the impatient traffic and the general disorganised noise of protestors not getting the timing quite right on their chant, it was hard to tell what, exactly, their protest was about, other than that they apparently disapproved of extraterrestrial life in general, and wanted somebody to do something about it.

A few wags had infiltrated the crowd with signs like “down with this sort of thing” and “DER TERK ER JERBS,” and the police were fighting an uphill battle just to keep the whole situation relatively peaceful and respectful, never mind the task of trying to disperse the mob and restore something that resembled normalcy.

As if there was any such thing now that the world had conclusive proof of the existence of intelligent alien life, and hostile alien life at that.

She reached over and turned down the radio, where some self-appointed authority was bemoaning the way that the alien vehicle had fled into space and vanished in a burst of Cherenkov radiation, and was insisting that the Royal Canadian Air Force had “screwed the pooch” by failing to intercept, ground and study it. His guest’s patient attempts to

explain that the vehicle in question had gone from a standing start to Mach 5, meaning that interception would have been completely impossible, were being dodged, mocked, or outright ignored.

It was the third time in one week they had encountered a mob of some kind, brandishing signs either welcoming the aliens to Earth, or expressing unspecified antagonism towards them. Kevin Jenkins reserved tolerant disdain for the former, and naked contempt for the latter.

For her part, Terri still wasn't sure she believed his story, but if it was true, she thought she could sense why he might react so strongly. After all, the first group were just naive airheads. The latter compounded that crime with prejudice, and prejudice seemed to really irritate Jenkins.

He claimed that reflex was largely due to the year and a half he had spent vagrant in the galaxy, surrounded by weird and varied alien species and lacking the basic rights that protected any of them. He had been on the receiving end of quite a lot of prejudice himself. Terri suspected that he was being a little unkind to interstellar society. Sure, being treated legally and officially as a non-sentient animal probably hadn't been great for his esteem, but the bitterness with which he spoke of his experience didn't quite gel with the fact that they had practically bent over backwards to get him home in the end.

“Are we there yet?” she asked. He shook his head and glanced at the car's GPS.

“This is Columbus,” He told her. “It's about thirty miles to Shelbyville.”

She examined the map on her phone and frowned. “Why did we leave the Interstate?”

“I’m hungry,” he replied, and her own stomach voiced vigorous agreement with that sentiment. He took the first opportunity as the protest moved on to pull over, into a strip mall where they ordered a Domino’s and watched the sea of banners meander out of sight at about the same speed as their pizza crawled through the oven.

Terri was famished: she inhaled her five slices before Jenkins had finished his third, and was only saved from the temptation of stealing a sixth when he ordered some sides for her. She had to admit, he was a good travelling companion—paid his share of the gas, took more than his fair share of time behind the wheel, had a knack for finding

the least terrible radio station in any given area, and mostly left her alone with her thoughts.

She was beginning to realise, however, that despite these qualities, and as attractive as he was, he was a difficult man to like. He was a little too...intense. He was at once both detached and too focused, as if whatever he might be doing or discussing was an unwelcome distraction from some more important business, to be given his full attention and dealt with swiftly and efficiently, minimizing the time until he could return that attention to where it belonged.

He was terse, both choleric and melancholic, self-confident to the point of arrogance, and had a particularly annoying habit of passing disparaging commentary on (or at least frowning at) pretty much every church sign they passed which, this being Indiana, happened about once every

minute or so. Terri, being Catholic, had quickly had to master the art of diplomatic silence.

She drove the remaining half hour to Shelbyville, with Jenkins lounging silently in the passenger seat, sketching or writing—she couldn't tell which—with cheap K-Mart stationery held against his raised knee. Occasionally he would pull out his cellphone and consult it.

Terri hadn't become a Private Investigator out of a shortage of curiosity, and her resolve finally wore out as they drove past the water tower at the edge of town.

“What're you working on, anyway?”

He glanced up, apparently surprised as if he had totally forgotten about her, then seemed to collect himself and showed her a few pages of sketchbook. The drawings were

angular and rough, clearly the work of an amateur, but also both recognisably non-human and recognisably plausible life-forms.

He tapped one which appeared to have a prosthetic limb. “That’s Kirk,” he said.

“Yeah, I’ve been meaning to ask about that. Kirk?”

“His name sounds like a rock stuck in a garbage disposal.” Jenkins said. “But the first syllable sounds a bit like ‘Kirk.’”

“Does he hang out with—” she began.

“Dammit, I don’t want to hear the Spock joke again!”

There was an uncomfortable silence for a few seconds, and then he regained his composure.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have snapped like that.”

“You’re tired, and you’ve heard it too many times. I understand.”

“Thanks, but... that ain’t all of it.”

“Wanna talk about it?” Terri offered.

He shrugged. “I guess I’m just on edge. Big shit’s comin’ and the world ain’t never gonna be the same after this. I guess I was kinda hoping this day would come in a few decades, when we were more ready.”

“Ready?”

“Y’know. Older and wiser.” He snorted and pulled a face at himself. “Guess I should start by gettin’ older and wiser myself, huh?”

Well. At least he owned up to it when he acted like a heel.

They turned onto a residential street and Terr quickly saw the address they were after—a little brown house with a little white porch and a ubiquitous stars-and-stripes hanging limp on a flagpole in the garden.

“But why are **you** on edge?” she asked him as she parked.

“You’re, like, the only person I’ve even heard of who seems to have a real handle on things now that the whole world’s gone alien-crazy.”

“Yeah. And I don’t like it,” he said, unbuckling his seatbelt.

She followed him out of the car. “What’s not to like?” She asked. He shrugged.

“Call me crazy, but it just don’t seem right that anybody could ‘have a handle’ on something this big, least of all a dumbass like me, you know?”

She wanted to reassure him that she’d much rather that *somebody* did. If the world was turning upside-down, she’d take whatever she could get. But the door opened before she could say it.

She’d seen a picture of the woman they were there to meet—early 40s, average height, and a slightly unusual hairstyle, which started as a long angular bang swept just away from her right eye and got progressively shorter around her head until the hair at her left temple was all but nonexistent. She had tired eyes and a general air of weariness about her, though the infant she was cradling on her arm and hip probably had much to do with that.

“Mrs. Naylor?” Terri asked, receiving a tiny wary nod by way of confirmation. She extended her hand. “I’m Terri Boone, we spoke by email.”

“Right, yeah. The investigator.” Mrs. Naylor shook the hand, hoisting her son up onto her hip a little as he chewed on a fist and stared at the strangers.

“May we come in?” Terri asked her. Naylor shook her head.

“I’m sorry,” she said “but I’m getting real sick and tired of people asking me questions. Seems like every idiot UFO hunter in the midwest wants to hear my...Oh, sweet baby Jesus Christ, you’re for real.”

Terri followed Mrs. Naylor’s gaze over her shoulder. Kevin Jenkins was holding up his sketchpad to show off a menagerie of alien life. Mrs Naylor stared at it slack-jawed

for a second, and then seemed to wake up a bit. Her parental fatigue practically evaporated off her face even as Terri watched, and she stood up a little straighter.

“You’d better come in,” she said. “And you can call me Hazel.”

Martin Tremblay was used to phone calls waking him up at odd hours of the night. His partner Stefan just slept through them nowadays, not even rolling over or reacting to the phone in any way. Phone calls for Martin were just part of the bedroom nighttime noise.

“Tremblay,” He answered, digging rheum out of the corners of his eyes so that he could focus on the alarm clock and then rubbing his stubble. 05:23. At least he’d got six hours.

“General, it’s Major Bartlett here, sir. The US have got something for us.”

“Something?”

“Apparently NASA was fed an anonymous tip a couple of days back. Seems there’s some kind of an...object orbiting Saturn that shouldn’t be there, sir.”

“Two days ago? What kind of an object?”

They had Cassini take a look at it, and apparently that takes a while, sir. As for what it is...best guess is that it might be a space station of some kind.”

”...I’ll come right in.”

Shaving, showering, dressing, grabbing a travel coffee and securing a mumbled, sleeping farewell from Stefan were

skills he'd honed throughout his career, and he drove on empty roads through pre-dawn darkness listening to AC/DC to help the coffee wake him up. By the time he'd cleared security at the base and reached the briefing, he was sharp and alert.

He strode into the office with coffee in hand, alert and eager to get down to business. "Okay. Brief me."

Bartlett didn't miss a beat, and just slapped a brown-covered folder stamped "CLASSIFIED" down onto the table. "On Tuesday, thirty hours after the incident in Vancouver, NASA receive an anonymous message delivered straight to Administrator's office, apparently from inside the Agency. The message detailed coordinates in orbit around the planet Saturn, directly opposite the planet from Earth and therefore invisible from here. We've not been informed what, exactly,

was in that message that convinced the Administrator to order that it be taken seriously and investigated, but at oh-two-hundred UST yesterday they got...” He tugged a mostly-black square out of the folder “...this image back from the Cassini probe.”

Tremblay examined the picture. The object was either very large or very distant, and so the probe’s cameras hadn’t taken a particularly sharp image, but it was hard to deny that, between a high albedo that looked an awful lot like steel panels and a hint of its shape—a cigar wearing three thin rings—it looked decidedly artificial.

“Cassini’s been up there since...?”

“Launched in ninety-seven, made orbit on July First, two thousand four, sir.”

“It’s been out there that long and never spotted this thing?”
Asked one of the other officers, Colonel Williams.

“It’s a big sky,” Bartlett told him. “And no offense to the NASA guys, but it’s an old camera, too. They had to point right at these coordinates to see it.”

“Besides,” Tremblay added, “We don’t know how long that thing’s been there. For all we know, it was only built last week.”

“Fair, I guess,” Williams conceded. “But what are we going to do about about it?”

“What *can* we do?” Tremblay countered. “It took seven years for Cassini to get out there. We send a mission, they aren’t coming home until their babies are going through puberty. We send a missile, even if we had a missile that can get out

there, they'll see it coming years in advance. We've already got a robot probe out there but it belongs to somebody else," he shrugged. "We're being watched. And I'll be honest, that fact doesn't bother me too much."

"Why not?"

"Well, A: it means that we're worth watching, which is flattering. But more importantly, it means B: that the psychos who hit Vancouver aren't the only life out there."

Bartlett frowned. "How do you figure that, sir?"

"Because if that was their listening post, gentlemen, then they'd have been better prepared."

There was a general nodding and a few grins. Much as it had turned the world upside-down, watching the alien

raiders get their laser-guided karma had been inspiring.

Bartlett cleared his throat. “And C, sir:”

“Yes?”

“We now know who to start talking with.”

“Councillor?”

‘Kirk’ raised his head. He had taken to napping in his office chair at every available opportunity—it was the only way to keep up with the amount of sleep he required. The Hunters slipping the quarantine net around Earth had become a major diplomatic incident, as much because of the questions about how the humans would respond, as because it showed just how far their stealth technology had come. Stations, fleets and facilities all over the galaxy were rushing to deal

with that latter problem, but within the halls of power, the fact that the humans now officially *knew* there was something out there had rapidly become the cause of greater alarm.

His aide, a Vzk'tk by the name of Rkrrnb, indicated that, within the sea of messages and information screens floating in the volumetric projection above his desk, one was blinking red in a steady one-two-three-pause-one-two-three-pause rhythm, indicating an internal message from somewhere on the Observatory, highest priority.

He thanked the young being with a wave of his prosthetic upperarm, while the remaining organic one grabbed the message and performed the interface gesture to open it.

He swore, making a sound rather like a plastic bucket full of bubblewrap being crushed by a backhoe.

The image was of the human research probe “Cassini,” which had been left intact on the grounds that its destruction might arouse suspicion.

Its largest camera was pointing directly at them.

He stared at it for a few long seconds, and then tapped a few physical controls on the desk. Rkrrnb retreated from the room as it began to erect a top-level diplomatic secrecy field. The volumetric display on his desk didn’t need long to begin filling up with the floating heads of his counterparts. Wherever you were, whatever you were doing, if an emergency session of the security council was called, you answered. Within minutes, the limited AI that served as the council’s speaker and impartial mediator called the session to order, and granted him the floor.

“We’ve been discovered,” he said.

